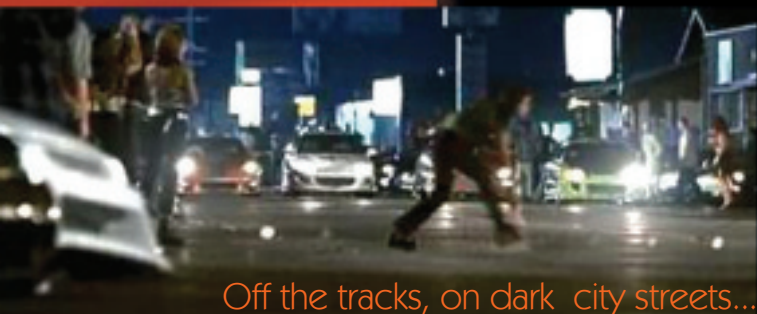


Hellbent on Having a Good Time

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Off the tracks, on dark city streets...

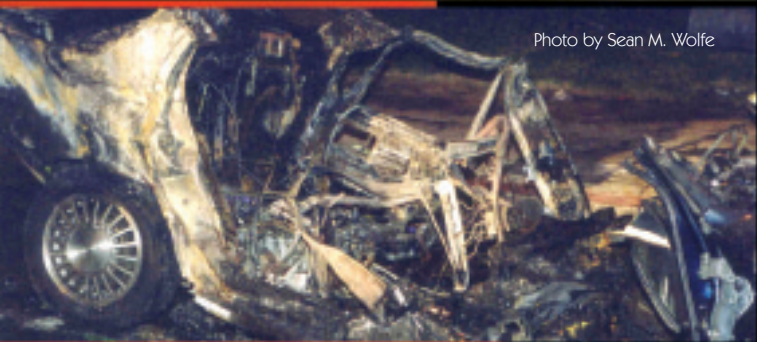


Photo by Sean M. Wolfe



It probably has been around since the first car rolled off the assembly line. Movies such as “Rebel Without a Cause” and “The Fast and the Furious” popularized it, and the National Hot Rod Association was born in 1951 to control it. What is “it”? Street (or highway) drag racing.

“But drag racing is illegal,” you say, and you’re correct. However, the law doesn’t mean much to youths who are hellbent on having a good time. One invincible teenage racer put the situation in perspective, “I think they should

The Sailors who borrowed this Acura Legend and went drag racing died when the car slammed into a light pole and burst into flames.

The driver of this white Mitsubishi was drag racing when he lost control. He suffered serious injuries.

legalize drag racing because we're just going to keep doing it—legal or not.”

“What about the possible consequences of their actions?” you ask. These young people simply don't care or don't think anything can happen to them. As the same teenager explained, “If I were to die racing, it wouldn't be a tragedy. I'd be doing something I love.”

There is nothing new about illegal drag racing or people dying or getting hurt in mishaps caused by this activity, and that includes young Sailors. Consider these examples:

- Two Sailors borrowed a friend's Acura Legend and went drag racing. While traveling about 80 mph in a 35-mph zone, the car slammed into a light pole and burst into flames, burning both Sailors beyond recognition.

- A 20-year-old Sailor and some of her friends started drinking at a local nightclub about 2300 one Sunday. Three hours later—at closing time—they left for home. The 20-year-old decided to drive a car belonging to one of her party friends because that friend acted drunk. She had another partygoer drive her car. Both drivers headed to an interstate, where they started racing at speeds faster than 100 mph. The 20-year-old lost control of the car she was driving. It crossed two lanes of traffic, left the road, spun and hit some trees rear-end first. The air bags didn't deploy, and the seat belt didn't save the driver.

- After spending an afternoon with friends in a local car club known to terrorize public roads, a Sailor joined the group for some evening racing. He only planned to watch because his car had some worn tires. When everyone heard the police were coming, they started fleeing the area. The Sailor, however, lost control of his car in a turn, ran into a tree, and was ejected. His injuries included broken vertebrae, a broken ankle, and a broken jaw. He told police he had consumed one beer within an hour before the mishap.

Drag racing no longer is just a part of the Southern California culture, as it has been for decades. It's now an obsession with youths in small towns and big cities, alike—and from all backgrounds.

Some cities have tried cracking down on illegal racing by increasing police patrols. However, they find out the racers have an at-all-costs attitude. They love what they're doing enough to risk being arrested or dying. In a few cases, cities that found they couldn't beat the racers decided to join them: They set up drag strips where the racers could practice their obsession—legally.

One such site in Southern California is Pomona Raceway, where about 1,000 cars race every weekend. Sponsored by more than a dozen law-enforcement agencies, this activity is designed to keep people from going out on weekend nights and racing in the streets. Police agencies and officials in other states are looking into setting up similar activities in their areas. As one official remarked, “We would like nothing better than never again hear about street racing.”

Another police official added, “We all once were kids, too, and we understand the urge for young people to drive fast, but it's dangerous—not only for them but for others. Like any crime, it's too often the innocent ones who get killed or hurt by drag racing.” Authorities acknowledge it's usually the bystanders who die at street races.

Yet, off the tracks, on dark city streets—and sometimes on highways—the races go on, and police say it's not a game. As the two cars line up, participants are nervous—but not because what they're about to do is illegal or because it could lead to the loss of their prized machines. Rather, it's because they know one of them isn't going to win, and in drag racing, winning is everything. Who has the fastest car is what it's all about.

Some in the crowd of onlookers scream or laugh, while others simply stare in awe, as the two cars tear down the street at speeds faster than 100 mph. In less than a minute, the race is over—which also may be the amount of time you have left on earth. Are you ready to die? If not, you'd better find another form of amusement—whether you're a participant or a spectator. ■